

State unveils new water plan

■ The public has 75 days to respond to a draft report about ways to solve water problems in the bay-delta, the hub of the state's water system.

By Candace L. Brown
R-S staff reporter

If you haven't done so yet, the time has come to pay attention to that funny word with all capital

letters that's permeated the news for the past four years.

Today CALFED will recommend a plan about how to solve California's water problems in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta re-

gion. This massive area, considered the hub of the state's water system, includes the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers and all the streams that feed them.

Three solutions will be presented, and one eventually will be implemented, at an estimated cost of \$4 billion to \$8 billion over 20 to 30 years.

For the next 75 days, the public has a chance to tell the state and federal agencies that make up CALFED what it thinks about the proposed solutions to problems of water quality, water supply and environmental decay.

Even if terms like "hydrologic regions" or "groundwater management" make your head spin, it's

important to pay attention to what CALFED is saying, officials say.

"This is the only horse to ride," said CALFED spokeswoman Kim Canevari in Sacramento. "We must pick a solution."

Forget farming and fishing. Even if all you do with water is drink it, you still should care about the report, she said.

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The bay-delta system provides drinking water for more than 20 million people and irrigates more than 4 million acres of farmland. It also supports 120 species of fish and wildlife.

"The state's economy is at risk if we can't fix the Bay-Delta," Canevari said.

For years, farmers, environmentalists and urban users have argued about the best way to manage California's limited water supply. In 1994, the Bay-Delta Accord was signed, paving the way for interested parties to develop a solution together.

Phase 1 of the Bay-Delta Program was completed in September 1996. It identified problems and goals and narrowed alternatives to three broad solutions.

The draft programmatic environmental impact statement/Environmental Impact Report of Phase 2 will be released today. It reviews the three alternatives and recommends one of them. The final Phase 2 report is expected to be done in September.

Phase 3 will implement the preferred solution. It's expected to start late this year or early next year and last for decades.

"People need to understand that this program isn't going to go away," said Richard Golb, executive director of the Northern California Water Association in Sacramento. "Anyone who lives in the Sacramento Valley, whether they're in agriculture or not, the CALFED report will touch all their lives in some way, shape or form."

One way it's certain to touch people is through their wallets, said Jenna Olsen of the Sierra

"There's a lot of taxpayer money at stake," she said. "People should make sure we're spending it right."

Olsen is also part of the Environmental Water Caucus, a group of 15 environmental and fishing organizations advising CALFED. The caucus believes water conservation can solve the state's problems, precluding the need for costly new dams and reservoirs.

But that's not the direction many environmentalists expect CALFED to take.

"There's a leaning toward these overengineered approaches, going back to the era of big dams," Olsen said. "We do not expect (water conservation) suggestions to be visible in the document they're going to unveil."

For example, the caucus ex-

pects CALFED to drastically underestimate the amount of water that farmers could conserve through innovative farming methods, she said.

Before any solution is implemented, CALFED must face hurdles such as cost and opposition from various interest groups, Golb said.

The public's lack of knowledge about the issue could also be a problem.

"I think of lot of people in California don't even know where the bay-delta is, let alone the need for a long-term solution," Golb said.

To request a copy of the report, call CALFED's toll-free line at (800) 900-3587. Summaries and the Phase 2 interim report are available on the Internet at calfed.ca.gov.

Written comments can be sent to the CALFED Bay-Delta Program, 1416 Ninth St., Suite 1155, Sacramento, CA 95814.

CALFED will hold public hearings throughout the state during the next two months to discuss the report. There will be a meeting in Redding at 7 p.m. May 14 at the Doubletree Hotel.

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